

VZCZCXYZ0785
RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHTV #0479/01 0601429
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 291429Z FEB 08
FM AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 5626
INFO RUEHXX/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE
RUEHFR/USMISSION UNESCO PARIS 0017
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

UNCLAS TEL AVIV 000479

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KPAL](#) [KIRF](#) [IS](#)

SUBJECT: Antiquities Authority Archeologist Criticizes
"Politicization" of IAA Digs in East Jerusalem

REF: Jerusalem 292

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: In a meeting with embaffs February 20, Israeli archeologist Gideon Suleimani, a staff archeologist with the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) and former head of the Authority's Jerusalem district, explained what he described as the ongoing "co-optation" of archeological digs by right-wing Jewish settler groups as a tool for establishing Jewish presence in locations throughout East Jerusalem. According to Suleimani, these groups are using archeology to promote the "judaization" of Jerusalem and to prevent the political division of the city in future negotiations. Echoing comments heard by others (reftel), Suleimani argued that the ongoing El'ad-financed excavations in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Silwan were undermining the community and adding tinder to the explosive issue of sovereignty in Jerusalem's historic basin. END SUMMARY.

2. (SBU) Suleimani, who for several years was the chief IAA archeologist for the Jerusalem district, described the "co-optation" of East Jerusalem excavations by settler groups as a function of shrinking government budgets for the IAA's work. Every year the GOI gives the IAA less, and settler organizations give it more, he said. He charged that all archeological digs in East Jerusalem are political and argued that they are not in the interest of the residents. Suleimani noted that he is not the only IAA archeologist concerned with the politicization of the digs in East Jerusalem, but said most of his colleagues are afraid to speak up for fear of losing their jobs and other negative repercussions. He said he is one of three archeologists to speak openly against settler-funded digs in East Jerusalem.

3. (SBU) Suleimani focused much of his discussion on the settler organization El'ad, which is the Hebrew acronym for "el ir david" or "to the City of David" (present-day Silwan, just south of the Old City). As reported reftel, El'ad is currently sponsoring a tunneling project that begins in Silwan and will end somewhere near the Western Wall plaza outside the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, going under the homes of many Palestinian residents along the way. Suleimani explained that when the Labor government came to power in 1992 and made it more difficult for settlers to acquire Palestinian property, El'ad shifted its tactics by acquiring a contract from the Israel Nature and Parks Authority to manage the national park that borders the Old City walls and includes the northern side of the City of David. El'ad realized it could take control of public areas of Silwan using archeological digs ostensibly aimed at further developing the national park. According to Suleimani, El'ad does so by working with the IAA to sponsor "tourist digs" in the City of David. Once a dig is initiated, El'ad fences off the area and limits the surrounding public space available to residents in the already crowded village of Silwan. He claimed that some of the digs bypass the legally mandated processes that govern the initiation of digging at new sites.

4. (SBU) Suleimani said that although the IAA initially resisted

these activities, it eventually became a kind of sub-contractor for El'ad, conducting excavations with lucrative contracts for the development of the City of David national park. He said that as the public budget for the IAA shrank over the years, it was supplemented by income received from El'ad and other settler groups who were willing to pay large sums for IAA excavations, leading to a situation where the IAA now relies on funds from these organizations even for its routine operating budget. Suleimani estimated that approximately one-third of the IAA's total operating budget now comes from "tourist digs" sponsored by the settler organizations El'ad, Ateret Cohanim (which focuses its efforts on acquiring Arab property in the Old City) and the semi-governmental Western Wall Heritage Fund (which manages the Western Wall plaza and tunnels system). (Note: IAA Director General Shuka Dorfman confirmed the relationship with groups like El'ad, Ateret Cohanim and the Western Wall Heritage Fund in a meeting with poloffs last summer, but described their sponsorship of digs as no different from that of any other legal Israeli entity wishing to develop a given site. Suleimani, on the other hand, described Dorfman as someone willing to do whatever these groups ask because of his dependence on their funds and personal support. End Note.)

15. (SBU) Suleimani also readily acknowledged that the settler movement is not the only player using archeology inappropriately in Jerusalem. When asked about the Waqf's role in archeological projects in Jerusalem, Suleimani said that the Waqf has caused "a lot of damage on the Temple Mount," primarily when it created a new mosque and access tunnels in 1997-98. He said Waqf coordination with the IAA (which is done quietly because of the political sensitivities on both sides) has slowly improved over the past two years, after a long hiatus caused by the tunnel riots of 1996 (in which dozens of people were killed when then-PM Benyamin Netanyahu and Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert approved a new opening of the Western Wall tunnel in the middle of the Old City's Muslim Quarter).

JONES